

San Bernardino Sun

Officials want more focus on air crisis

Andrew Silva, Staff Writer

Article Launched: 05/04/2007 12:00:00 AM PDT

LOS ANGELES - Hoping to prevent thousands of "invisible deaths," Southern California officials on Thursday called on the governor and president to declare a state of emergency over the region's polluted air.

"We're hopeful we'll get their attention," said San Bernardino County Supervisor Gary Ovitt, who on Thursday became president of the Southern California Association of Governments, or SCAG.

SCAG is the six-county planning agency responsible for creating transportation and housing plans.

The California Air Resources Board estimates 5,400 people a year die prematurely in Southern California as a result of air pollution, especially the fine particles that are largely the result of diesel emissions.

"These are invisible deaths," Ovitt said. "We need to get across that this needs to be dealt with right away."

The regional council of SCAG, made up of elected officials from throughout the region, unanimously agreed to seek the unusual step.

It's not clear what effect an emergency declaration would have, even if the governor went along.

Such declarations are generally reserved for natural disasters such as earthquakes, fires and floods.

Officials would like to see tougher regulations on diesel emissions implemented more quickly, or they want greater authority to regulate pollution sources including trains, ships and trucks that are under state or federal jurisdiction.

"Eighty percent of the emissions are controlled by federal agencies," said Mark Pisano, executive director of SCAG.

The SCAG resolution called for a summit meeting of politicians, regulatory agencies and community members to address the emergency.

"The time to act is now, and I strongly urge our partners in Washington and Sacramento to recognize the seriousness of this air-quality and public-health crisis and act immediately," Pisano said in a written statement.

The region still has the dirtiest air in the nation, though it is far cleaner than it was two decades ago.

But the region is also the hub of freight shipments from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach to the rest of the country.

Shipping relies almost exclusively on heavy diesel trucks, trains and ships.

Diesel will get cleaner in the coming years, with tough regulations either recently enacted or in the pipeline.

The ports, a major source of pollution, are launching ambitious plans to reduce diesel emissions.

None of that will be soon enough for the region to meet its federally required target of cleaning particulate pollution by 2015, officials say.

Just as important as regulations is the money to make the changes, said Dennis Washburn, a Calabasas councilman and chairman of the SCAG committee that drafted the resolution.

The request for an emergency declaration is a political statement the officials hope will lead to practical changes.

"It's a device. It's a political technique to convince people we need to act now," Washburn said. "Every moment wasted is another life lost."

Riverside Mayor Ron Loveridge agreed.

"We put enormous resources (into cleaning the air), yet we still have a health crisis," he said. "For the first time, SCAG is trying to dramatize this."

The state and federal governments should help reduce the effects of diesel pollution through the region's crowded trade corridors because the entire country benefits from the shipping industry while the effects are concentrated here, he said.

It remains to be seen if the request for an emergency declaration will help.

"In addition to the symbolism is the hope that resources will follow," he said.

Contact writer Andrew Silva at (909) 386-3889 or via e-mail at andrew.silva@sbsun.com.